



U.S. Department of Labor



A Teacher's Guide

“Every worker is entitled to a fair wage, safe working conditions, and a sense of dignity and respect. And that is why sweatshops have no place on the American landscape. They rob working people not only of the decent wages and working conditions they deserve, but more importantly the simple human dignity that is the birthright of all of us.”

U.S. Labor Secretary Alexis M. Herman

Sweatshops: A Thing of the Past?

Arguably, one of the country’s most notable garment sweatshops was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. It was there in 1911 that 146 immigrant women and children died because of locked fire exits and inadequate fire extinguishing systems. That tragedy helped put basic workplace safety and health considerations in the public spotlight.

Since then, many people assumed that sweatshops were a thing of the past. Until El Monte, California, that is.

On Aug. 2, 1995, in a raid on a garment sewing shop in El Monte, Labor Department and California state investigators discovered 72 Thai workers, forced into slavery-like conditions. The workers toiled as many as 16 hours a day for as little as 70 cents an hour and were surrounded by razor-wire fences.

Sweatshops were back, if indeed they ever left.

A Closer Look at the Problem

Garment workers are frequently among the most exploited and vulnerable workers in the country. They are often immigrant and non-English speaking and unlikely to

complain about their working conditions. They are often paid significantly less than the minimum wage. They can work long hours for no overtime pay. (The law generally requires paying workers at 1 1/2 times their regular rate of pay for all hours worked over 40 in a week.) They frequently can be younger than the law allows.

The environment in which these people work can be quite simply unsafe and, in the most extreme cases, horrendous. Locked exits, electrical hazards, unsanitary conditions can be common features found in a sweatshop.

Garment workers are usually employed by contractors, who often pay cash to avoid making legal deductions or maintaining payroll records. These contractors can suddenly close up shop, remove their machines and disappear overnight, owing several weeks worth of wages. Soon, they are opening up in a new location, under a new name, operating with the same disregard for workers' safety and welfare.

The Garment Industry: Who is Responsible?

Today's garment industry is a fiercely competitive one. It's a \$45 billion a year business with more than 1 million workers. Retailers and manufacturers rarely engage in the actual production of apparel but have significant interest and control over how it is produced. Retailers dictate to manufacturers what, when, and where garments are produced. Manufacturers then purchase the material and contract out the work to sewing contractors.

Many of the business leaders in the garment industry are running their operations by doing the right thing. They follow the requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which ensures that workers are paid fairly, and the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which ensures safe and healthy working conditions.

But the bad actions of some employers have tarnished the good reputations of others. They have created an unfair advantage over their competitors and unfair treatment of their workers. A 1996 random compliance survey of garment contractors in Los Angeles, California, for example, revealed that sweatshops were prevalent in that area: 43 percent did not pay minimum wage; 55 percent did not pay overtime; 64 percent did not keep adequate payroll records; and 96 percent did not provide safe or healthy work environments.

What's Being Done about Sweatshops

The Labor Department is committed to eradicating garment sweatshops and bringing the garment industry into compliance with U.S. labor laws. To confront the rampant industry problems, the department implemented a four-pronged strategy to make lasting, positive changes for garment workers.

Enforcement. Using strike forces and, where possible, involving state and other federal agencies, the department conducts targeted enforcement sweeps in major garment centers. When violators are found, the department invokes the “hot goods” provision of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which makes it illegal for certain persons to ship goods in interstate commerce made in violation of the law.

Partnerships. To combat sweatshops, the department is seeking help from everyone—businesses and unions from every sector of the garment industry, consumers, religious groups, and every concerned American—to develop strategies and participate in the effort to end sweatshops. We are also taking this partnership to international groups of government leaders to enlist their support worldwide.

Education. The department helps educate the industry on tactics for ensuring that their contractors are following the law. We have also let the public know that sweatshops are still a problem and enlisted its support in the fight against them.

Recognition. The department has sought to engage the more financially and visibly responsible retailers and manufacturers in an effort to increase compliance in all tiers of the industry. To recognize those industry leaders, the department established a “Trendsetter” list, now numbering 31 retailers and manufacturers representing more than 115 apparel labels and thousands of retail stores, each of which has committed to monitoring its contractors, that is, checking on them to make sure they are paying workers fairly and providing safe working environments.

The Importance of Monitoring

Monitoring workplace practices in the garment industry provides a way of checking to make sure that workers are paid fairly and that their working conditions are safe. An effective monitoring program uses trained individuals with experience in the garment industry to conduct unannounced site visits with contractors to:

- determine the hours worked by employees and actual pay they received,
- observe the employees’ working conditions,
- determine whether any children are working,
- establish that the contractor is following labor laws, and
- determine whether the contractor is using subcontractors.

The results of the Labor Department’s 1997 San Francisco Garment Industry Compliance Survey—conducted with the State of California—found that when companies

monitor, overall compliance with minimum wage and over-time laws is 87 percent. Only 68 percent of firms that do not monitor their operations and their contractors were in compliance. The message is clear: monitoring works—and it works especially well on behalf of American garment workers.

An End to Sweatshops

In the past 4 years, the department has recovered more than \$12.6 million in back wages for 41,000 garment workers across the country. There's no question that it's getting more difficult for sweatshop operators to hide from the spotlight.

But, just as importantly, many organizations and individuals have joined in the fight against sweatshops.

- The Apparel Industry Partnership—a group made up of footwear and apparel industry executives, labor union officials, consumer and human rights organizations—has signed an agreement to work for a voluntary industry code of conduct and independent monitoring to ensure the code of conduct is put into practice.
- Dozens of national manufacturers have signed agreements to monitor the compliance of their contractors and hundreds more are trying to monitor on their own.
- Members of the Socially Responsible Investment Community on Sweatshops, which manages portfolios totaling more than \$639 billion, signed a statement deploring the pervasiveness of sweatshops in the United States and abroad, and called upon retailers, manufacturers, consumers, regulators, investors, and labor groups to join in taking responsibility for an unacceptable situation.

- A national poll conducted by Marymount University's Center for Ethical Concerns in Virginia showed that consumers are very concerned about worker exploitation. The poll of consumers indicated that 83 percent of shoppers are willing to pay up to \$1 extra on a \$20 garment to ensure worker protection. The poll also indicated that nearly 80 percent of shoppers would avoid establishments identified with sweatshop operations.

Discussion Questions

The United States has had sweatshops for decades. Why do you think that is?

Do you think sweatshops are more common today than in the past?

When you shop for clothes, do you ever look for the best deal, the lowest price? If you knew that the lowest-priced t-shirt was made in a sweatshop, would you still buy it?

How much are you willing to pay for a sweatshirt? Would you be willing to add to that price to be sure that the people who made it are paid fairly? If so, how much extra would you pay?

Do you ever buy clothes because of the brand name on them? If so, why? Do you think that the price for brand-name clothes includes more money for the workers who made them?

If you wanted to start today to put an end to sweatshops, how would you go about it?

Ideas for Followup Activities

Take the *Getta Clue* shopping tips and put them into practice.

Devise an advertising campaign to enlist the public's help in ending sweatshop conditions.

Browse the Internet for stories about sweatshops.

Create a consumer guide for No Sweat shopping.

Write a book to teach elementary school kids about sweatshops.

Research all the costs, not just labor and materials, associated with running a business.

Recommended Reading

General Labor History

Richard B. Morris, *The U.S. Department of Labor Bicentennial History of The American Worker* (GPO, 1976).

Milton Meltzer, *Bread and Roses, The Struggle of American Labor, 1865-1915* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

Sweatshops

Leon Stein, ed., *Out of the Sweatshop, the Struggle for Industrial Democracy* (Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977).

Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Lippincott, 1962).

Visit Our No Sweat Website at www.dol.gov, where you'll find the department's "Trendsetter" list and a lot of other information on sweatshops.